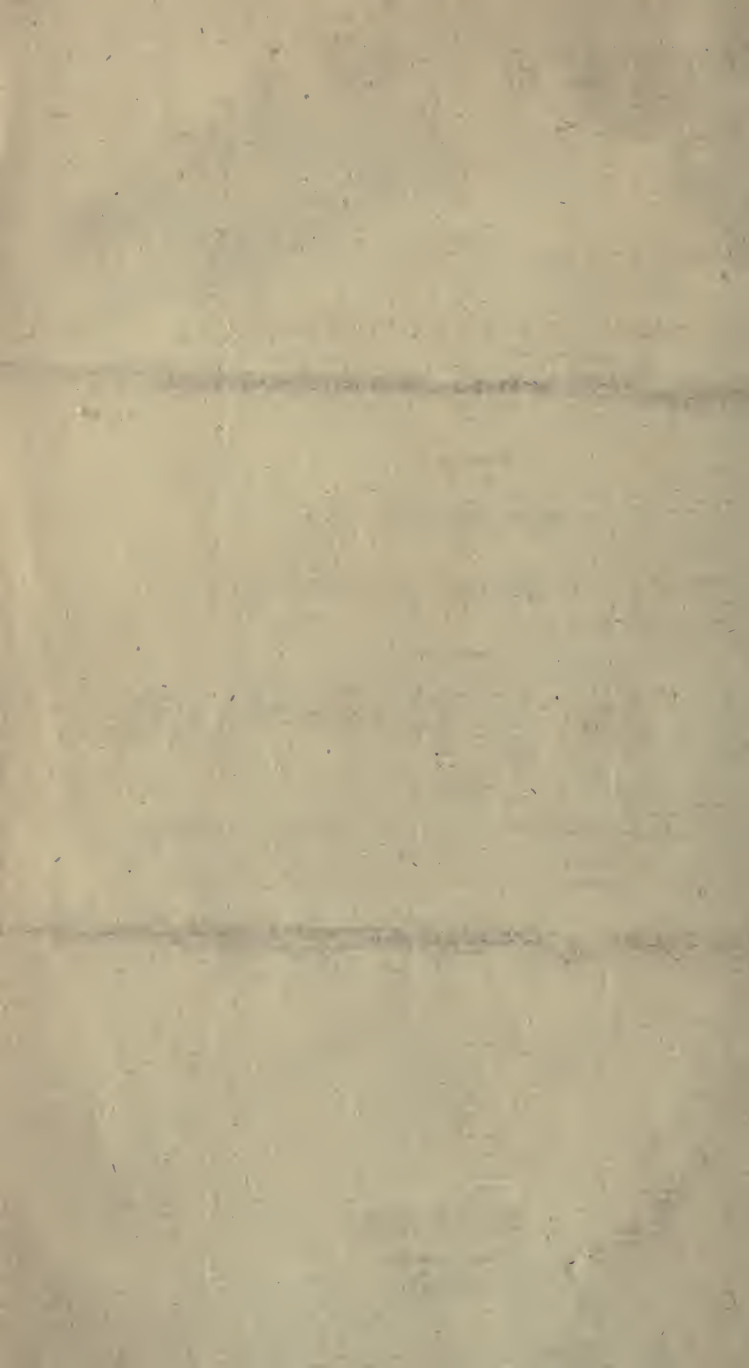


Ec.H
L6512

Letter to ... William Pitt,
upon the subject of his late speech
in Parliament, concerning the Scots
distilleries.



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LETTER

TO THE

RIGHT HON. WILLIAM PITT,

CHANCELLOR OF HIS MAJESTY'S EXCHEQUER,

Es. Es. Es.

UPON THE SUBJECT OF

HIS LATE SPEECH IN PARLIAMENT,

CONCERNING

THE SCOTS DISTILLERIES.

BY A MID-LOTHIAN FARMER.



Edinburgh:

1797.

568995

16.9.53



L E T T E R, &c.



S I R,

WHEN the subject of the Scots Distilleries was last brought before the Honourable the House of Commons by Mr Rose, he was pleased to say, that it was a business of much intricacy, which merited minute investigation. He told the House, that his Majesty's Ministers had anxiously sought for information upon the subject, but they were not yet fully informed; that what information they had received, had come but lately to their hands; and that therefore it was not ripe for immediate discussion.

The business having been introduced, you thought proper thus to express yourself:

“ That the present measure was only intended
“ for a limited time; that the duties on all the Di-
“ stilleries in Scotland must be much higher than
“ they are at present, or else the Stills must be stopt
A “ altogether;

“ altogether ; for the police of that part of the coun-
 “ try, and the regard that ought to be paid to its
 “ morals as well as health, required there should
 “ be a great increase in the price of spirits. The
 “ question was a question of revenue certainly, but
 “ the revenue must be relinquished altogether, and
 “ the Distilleries stopt, if the consumption of spi-
 “ rits could not be diminished in that part of the
 “ kingdom ; for the excesses which the present use
 “ of them occasioned were enormous.”

You surely, Sir, merit much commendation for
 delaying the discussion of the business, so as you
 may obtain accurate information, and have time to
 deliberate maturely upon the subject ; for I am
 persuaded, that nothing but very erroneous state-
 ments could have induced you to express yourself
 as you have done. Though, therefore, I occupy a
 very humble station in society, I shall make no apo-
 logy for this address, as I think myself entitled to
 embrace the opportunity afforded by the delay of
 the business, to lay before you the following state-
 ment, which, from what you said in the House, I
 am persuaded will be found entirely new to you.

There were three points of view, in which
 you was pleased to present the Scottish Distil-
 leries before the Honourable the House of Com-
 mons : *First*, You considered them as the occa-
 sion of disorder to the internal police of Scot-
 land ; *secondly*, As having perverted the morals
 of

of that people ; and, *lastly*, As having enervated both body and mind, by destroying their health and constitution. Feeling that generous compassion, which the view of such extensive miseries must necessarily excite, you disclaim the benefits arising to the public revenue from the Distilleries ; so deeply do you deplore those pernicious effects !

Whilst I read your speech, I almost felt your spirit. . *I felt you was right* ; for a truly patriotic Government will cheerfully struggle through every difficulty in matters of finance, rather than patronize or permit any manufacture, any occupation, to be carried on, by which the health of the people might be enervated, their moral impressions weakened, and a general derangement introduced into the police of the country. But a very little recollection called off my attention from the splendor of the sentiment, to the truth of the subject ; and I cannot help expressing my astonishment, that a gentleman of your acuteness in discerning the characters of men, and who is possessed of such nice political powers, which enable you to discover truth amidst the multifarious informations, which on every political subject are daily laid before you. I am astonished that you should have suffered yourself to be so easily, so entirely misled, by the *acknowledged* imperfect informations you have received, which, either by direct falsehood, or designed ambiguity, have kept the truth entirely out of view, and led you to make hasty, unfounded, and dangerous conclusions.

I know not, indeed I cannot know, who are your informers, nor what they can have said to you concerning the Scots Distilleries. These details are among the arcana of Government ; but it is now no secret that the impresson made by them upon your mind is, *That the people of Scotland have become highly immoral and disorderly, and so enormously intemperate, that they will drink to excess ; by the use of spirituous liquors they will render both their bodies and their mind incapable of virtuous exertion, unless they are restrained by the coercive power of Government.*

Permit me, Sir, with all due submission, to observe, you did not judge wisely to hold Scotland up to the world in so contemptible a point of view. There is not any kingdom in Europe, according to the extent of population, where you will find greater numbers of men, possessed of the best virtues of human nature, and endued with the nicest feelings of personal honour. But whatever you may think of this remark, your public attack upon the public character, the respectability, the virtue, and honour of this country, has been acutely felt, and has excited a general glow of indignation. The people of Scotland are indeed poor, but in the midst of their poverty they are proud ; and though their pride is not the pride of wealth, it is the pride of honesty, of industry, of virtue ; a pride of character incompatible with debauchery, with understandings deranged, and bodies enfeebled by intemperance,

rance. I, who have lived in Scotland for three score years, can from perfect knowledge of the country assure you, that you are totally deceived by your informers; the people of Scotland cannot be justly accused of a disposition to intemperance; there are some worthless wretches in every country, and many persons of dissipated and immoral characters are certainly to be found in Scotland; but do you, for this reason, think yourself entitled to stigmatize their national character? Is it consistent with your political justice or wisdom, to tell the Scots nation that you consider them as a race of such fools and blackguards, that it requires the coercive hand of Government to restrain, and to preserve them in decency and moderation. I intreat, Sir, you will permit yourself to be better informed; let a comparison be made between the inhabitants of Scotland and those of any other country, and I am sure, that, in point of sobriety, it will be highly in their favour.

Intemperance is indeed the prolific parent of many crimes, but if I may give credit to the very ingenious statements of Mr Colquhoun upon the police of London, and calculate the extent of intemperance from the number of crimes there committed, I will take upon me to say, the people of Scotland are comparatively temperate indeed! For by these statements it appears, there are more crimes committed within one week in London, than will be found throughout all Scotland for many years. Why then do you not allow them

a character for temperance in proportion? Some person possibly has told you, that he is plagued with his footmen or coachmen, who get often intoxicated; it may have been represented to you, that some manufacturers have complained, that a few of their labourers have for a while deserted their work, injured their master, and hurt their families. But are such trifling details worthy the ear or consideration of a statesman? Are these sufficient to involve the character of a whole nation? *Let Scotland alone, Sir*, and you will find them retain their invariable character of a high-minded, active, industrious, and sober people.

It is indeed very difficult to get at the secrets of Government; and though I had the opportunity, I have not the least inclination to do it; but when public report points out any thing which affects the general interest, whether the report is true or false, it is right to prevent its being productive of injurious consequences. It is for this reason I beg leave to state to you the following particulars.

Report says, that the commanding officers of certain regiments lately come from England have represented, that it is with extreme difficulty they can maintain the discipline and sobriety of their soldiers, on account of the cheapness of spirits in this country, and therefore they had petitioned for their recall. And report adds, you have taken this for a decisive fact, and as characteristic of the state of this country.

An able politician weighs every circumstance before he decides. Did you prohibit the distillation of rum in the West-India Islands, before you sent thousands there who perished, being poisoned by drinking it new in that destructive climate? Have you forgot how the army under the Duke of Brunswick perished by eating the grapes of Champagne, when they marched into France? And yet these vines are not rooted up, as destructive to the people of that province. Did it not occur to you, that these foldiers who were sent to Scotland must have been very profligate and unprincipled indeed, before they reached this place, seeing they have been so easily, so suddenly corrupted? Might it not have occurred to you, that as these men were called upon to suppress mobs and riots, which is always an ungracious and disagreeable service to a foldier, that on this occasion they have possibly met with more than ordinary indulgence from their officers, and discipline been suffered a little to relax? Might it not have occurred to you, that as you know his Majesty, of his wonted goodness, has increased the foldiers pay, and as in Scotland they found provisions much cheaper than they did in England, that of consequence they found more money in their pockets than they were accustomed to, or knew how to make a good use of; and that, therefore, they could not resist the opportunity and temptation to indulgence, which they had no principles to oppose? All this you might have pondered before you had decided, before you had

had allowed a few drunken soldiers to lead your judgement respecting the moral situation of a country.

Consider, Sir, have any of the commanders of the Scots Fencible regiments profer'd a similar complaint? This, I am persuaded, is far from being the case; for every other day I read in our newspapers, large encomiums upon the orderly behaviour of the Scots regiments, published by the people of those places where they have been stationed. Indeed it is a well known fact, that those sons of the north, being better principled, even among all the temptations to which they are habituated from their youth, obey their officers, maintain their virtue, and are even accumulating what by them is esteemed wealth, which I hope a speedy peace will give them opportunity to enjoy. You might have weighed these circumstances, you ought to have balanced the evidence, and then you would have seen, whether cheap spirits or licentious soldiers are in the fault. But you may now surely say, how the balance stands, which ought to decide your judgement as to the temperance of Scotsmen.

I am farther informed, that as some time ago the meetings of those styled the Friends of the People in Scotland were represented to you as originating in the intemperance of the people, occasioned by the cheapness of spirits, and that you gave credit to that representation; so at present the mobs and riots which in this country illegally opposed the execution of the Militia-act, have been represented to you

as derived from the same origin. I have no doubt but you have received such representations, for I know many gentlemen in this country who are panic-struck, who resolve every disagreeable event to the prevalence of *reforming, revolutionary, democratic principles*. As these men attribute every disaster which has happened in France, to atheism and false philosophy; so being unable or unwilling to find another cause, the existence of these principles, and every disorder which happens in this country, without the slightest countenance from reason or truth, are imputed to the intemperate use of spirits, and therefore to the Distilleries. But if you, Sir, were as well acquainted with the real state of this country as I am, such information would make no impression upon your mind, and you would distrust the trembling weakness of your feeble-minded informers.

You, who are deeply read in human nature, know assuredly, that neither in Scotland nor any where else, has treason or sedition originated, or been supported by men addicted to intemperance; nor can it ever happen. The Reforming Societies of Scotland were never accused of it; and it was in some measure their sobriety which made them dangerous.

Attend to the history of the late riots, and you will find, that not one of them was excited in any populous town, where disorderly people are generally found most numerous; they commenced in obscure country-villages,

were collected in country-parishes ; they were indeed the “ tears of Rachel weeping for her children ;” for the harmless peasants, with domestic, with feeling, with affectionate hearts, looked upon their children, when compelled to become soldiers *so young*, as lost to them, and lost to virtue for ever. Had the Scots Militia-act been as comprehensive in Scotland as it is in England, I would have answered with my life for every riot it would have produced in this country.

The Scots people were always foremost, they were proud to defend their country ; but they felt themselves entitled to be put upon a footing with their countrymen in England. It would be affectation, therefore, if you pretended to believe those sickly informations ; you know it is impossible they can be true. Look a little deeper, and you will discover the *origin* of these reports ; look a little deeper and you will discover the *origin* of the discontents and riots which have so much prevailed ; but you never will find the well-founded government and police of this country affected with danger, or disordered by the cheapness of Scots spirits. It is a calumny, gross and unfounded, to alledge, that the Scots people, of any description, are addicted to general intemperance ; to think, therefore, of founding an act of Parliament upon that idea, is a dangerous insult upon the people of Scotland, and a wise Legislature will be cautious of making such an experiment.

I beg, Sir, you will not misconstrue my intention, as if I held an argument for the sake of the Distillers; I hold myself disconnected with every such idea; do with them as you please, tax them as you think proper; but let neither the public character, or public interest suffer, by your giving heed to informations so totally devoid of foundation and common sense.

I pay very little attention, indeed, to the anxiety you express for the health of the people of Scotland, to preserve which you would deprive them of spirituous liquors. The whole country laughs at the idea! Here, Sir, in a cold, clear, bracing climate, parents transmit to their children vigorous constitutions, tortured with few diseases, and none of these *imaginary*; we in general live as long as men should wish to do for happiness; and we enjoy life as long as we live. This is far from indicating the debilitating powers of intemperance.

Thus, I hope, your mind is set at rest from your distressing apprehensions as to the police, the morals, and the health of the people of Scotland, being ruined by the Distilleries. You see your information upon the subject has been imperfect, false, or treacherous. As the ills do not exist, they stand not in need of the coercive hand of power to remedy them. But though you should as yet remain unsatisfied, though with patriotic affection you still deplore the *deranged and miserable state of Scotland*, and were still disposed to attribute these calamities

mities to the *cheapness of spirits*; yet I must beg leave to observe to you, that the remedy you propose is not only *highly impolitic*, but *entirely incompetent to the end proposed*.

You have justly and humanely renounced all idea of revenue, when it comes in competition with the more momentous object of public order, and the moral prosperity of the people. I shall therefore put the subject of the revenue entirely out of the question, and suppose, with you, the whole Distilleries in Scotland suppressed. Now, tell me, Sir, do you really and seriously think, that upon that event the people of Scotland will take your prescription, and relinquish the use of spirits? Do you sincerely think, that upon that event spirits would be considerably dearer than they are at present? Is it possible that you can be so ill informed as to be persuaded, that it is the legal licensed Distillers acting legally, who occasion the spirits being sold so cheap as they are at present? I ask these questions, because I am sure their answer is plain to every thinking person who is acquainted with the truth of the subject.

In Scotland, this northern climate, in the most sober and best regulated families, spirits are considered amongst the necessities of life, and you might as well forbid an Englishman to eat beef or bacon, as prohibit the Scots the use of spirits. The climate demands it, and immemorial habit has given strength to the demand, and rendered it irresistible.

In such a situation, there is not an arrangement within the power of his Majesty's Ministers, nor even within the power of the Parliament of Great Britain, which can prevent its gratification.

It is needless, upon this topic, to shew away, in eloquent harangues. The strong universal propensity of a people cannot be set aside by the *arm of power*. A long, a powerful, an universal habit, cannot be dissolved by any exertion of *authority*. To attempt it, is impolitic, it is *dangerous* ; and the disappointment of every plan which can be offered, will demonstrate the weakness of the policy. Inclination, interest, and even disgust, as the restraint will instigate every man to assist his neighbour, and in effect every man will become a smuggler, and the most daring smuggler will become the greatest favourite with the irritated public. Spirits will be manufactured in every corner, and will be brought to market without the burden of duties, and consequently be sold much cheaper than they can be afforded by a licenced manufacturer. Even at present, smuggling Stills abound in great numbers every where. An unlicenced apparatus was employed by many licenced Distillers, to evade the duties ; and the vast influx of spirits from these sources, was, *and now is*, the real cause of the cheapness of spirits ; and these smuggling Stills were wrought so openly, that it was the general opinion, ~~and in the north~~, they were *connived* at by the Officers of Excise. But even when they were seized there, it made no difference ; the

Justices of the Peace condemned the smugglers in hundreds, for their illegal practices ; but mercifully modified the fines, sometimes even so low as a shilling Sterling ; and the reason has been known and allowed by some of themselves. *The landlord would have lost his rent if the smuggler had been ruined ;* so it was judged best to send him home to re-commence his illegal manufactory. I know for certain, all this has often happened, and I am fully persuaded it will happen again ; and if your plan of reform takes place, it will soon become a general practice ; because, to encourage it will be the interest of all. What, then, will become of your plans of police, of morality, and of health, for this country ? *Alas, poor Scotland ! unless thou art supported by thine own virtue,* the plans of the Rt Honourable Chancellor of the Exchequer will not preserve thee from destruction.

But farther, it is not only the internal manufacture of smuggled spirits upon which our supply will depend ; the foreign smuggler will also lend us his willing hand. Our industrious neighbours the Dutch, though possessed of fraternising principles, will not forget their industry ; they will plentifully supply us with their gin, they will exult upon your plan for reforming Scotland ; they will hear with pleasure, that you have provided for them a ready market, that the controuling hand of authority has increased the profits of the smuggling trade, and disposed every heart and hand in Scotland to join issue with them, and assist their operations. Foreign spirits will

will then be found plentiful and cheap indeed. All the fleets and Excise Officers in Britain will not prevent their importation, when so sure a premium, and so kindly and universal a welcome, will be afforded to the smuggler. Even at present, though we are at war with the Dutch, and our fleets cover the seas, smugglers are upon our coasts every day; insomuch, that to the north of the Frith of Forth, Dutch gin competes with our home-made spirits, in quantity, price, and consumption; so that many dealers in spirits will tell you, that they can hardly sell a drop of any thing else but gin; and they laugh at any person who wonders how they get it. In short, Sir, the country will be supplied, whatever measures you may think proper to adopt; and as to peace, morals, and health, you shall have the mortification to find the country continue precisely as it was before you attempted to reform it, with only the addition of the profligacy ~~of~~ numerous, a daring, and abandoned race of lawless smugglers, who are always without the protection, and without the controul, of the laws of their country. You will have the mortification, not only to have made a sacrifice of a large productive revenue for nothing, but to have given energy to a commerce, which will be a perpetual drain of money from the kingdom, and be indeed prejudicial to the country, in every point of view.

After what has been already stated, I am persuaded I need scarcely observe to you, that the imposition of such an extravagant duty as you seem

to threaten, will operate in the same way, and have all the pernicious effects, of an absolute prohibition. This is so obvious, that I shall not dwell upon it; but before I dismiss this part of the subject, that my purpose may not be misconstrued, I embrace the opportunity to state, that there is not, in my opinion, a more fair subject of taxation than the Distilleries, which offer a revenue very valuable indeed, in the present state of the public distress; but whatever duties may be imposed, they ought to be exacted with steadiness and vigour; the licensed Distiller should not be permitted to smuggle, nor the smuggler permitted to work at all. The Excise Officer should be obliged to do his duty faithfully, and suffer when he is found negligent; and the Justices of the Peace should be required to judge without partiality, and, upon no consideration whatever, be permitted to modify the penalties to delinquents; nor ought any distinction be permitted in the extent of the duties exacted. If these particulars were settled, I would be decidedly of opinion, that as the spirits are at present offered to market at too low a price, for the consumption and advantage of the community; so whatever advance may be safely made in the price of the article to the consumer, it is right to apply that advanced price proportionally to the revenue of the Crown. Upon such a statement, an increase of duty will appear just and reasonable.

And here I wish much I could give you the needful information, that you might strike upon
that

that medium, which will neither destroy nor cramp the manufacture, hurt the agricultural interest of the country, disappoint the hopes of the revenue, nor encourage the smuggler. But I have no such connection with the Distillers, as might enable me to throw light upon the subject, in that point of view; for, like every other person, whose business is affected by taxes, they are cautiously tenacious of the secret of their trade. Notwithstanding this, I take the liberty to remark, that in your budget last year, you took the Scots Distilleries at L. 550,000; I am now told, that in consequence of your reforming scheme, if you do not prohibit Distillation in Scotland, it is your design to double, some say treble, the above duty. This last would make it L. 1650,000. It is but reasonable to suppose the cost of grain will equal the duties, and the expence of the manufacture, amount to a third of the grain, so that, without reckoning any profit to the Distillers, the expence will amount to L. 3,850,000. Now, the whole inhabitants of Scotland, men, women, and children, are computed at little more than one million and a half; and I am perfectly assured, that at least two thirds of these scarcely ever taste spirits; as, therefore, the Scots manufacture is confined to the consumption of that country, this immense sum, with a suitable profit to the Distillers, must be paid by that comparatively small body of people, *else the Distilleries must entirely cease.*

I throw out these observations to your discerning political mind, because, whilst on the one hand they hold forth the absurdity of such an increase of duties, on the other, they exhibit *data*, by which you may form an idea of the probable consumption of spirits in Scotland, and then you may judge what duties that consumption may reasonably afford. In forming a judgement upon the subject, I would neither attend to the gloomy apprehensions of the timid, nor the declamations of pretended moralists, nor the interested information of ale and porter brewers, nor to the unfounded complaints of the distillers; they have already led you to make too many experiments upon this subject; inasmuch, that the perpetual fluctuation of the Scots Distillery laws is a disgrace to legislation. Let the subject be now considered deliberately, without prejudice; let duties be imposed upon the trade to the utmost extent the reasonable consumption of the article will admit; defend the fair trader, and preserve the manufacture as a great means of our national agricultural prosperity; and in doing this, you may rest assured, spirits will not be sold too cheap in Scotland; and all your ideal terrors respecting the state of the country will vanish into nothing, and men of understanding will approve of your arrangements.

No speculation, Sir, appears to me more certain, than are the immense profits, which every department of the community would assuredly derive, were the Scots Distillers encouraged to make their
spirits

spirits an object of foreign commerce ; but whatever is in this, the effect of the distilleries upon the agricultural interest of this country, is no speculation, nothing has more contributed towards its improvement, and nothing can be more necessary to its establishment ; to detail the particulars, would occasion my being too prolix, and I am so deeply concerned, I might become too earnest upon the subject. One thing is certain, that this very season, in consequence of a cold summer, an irregular and late harvest, there are, in Scotland, many many thousand quarters of barley, which can be applied properly to no other use than Distillation, and your menaces against the Distilleries, have already deeply affected the market. In truth, Sir, you cannot conceive with what anxiety we farmers look annually, in apprehension of some fatal Distillery law ; you cannot conceive the horror with which we read your last speech in the House of Commons upon that subject. *Sir, you will, you must ease our apprehensions, and not cast our families into poverty and despair.*

Will you, who have rendered yourself highly respectable, for your political abilities, and for applying the resources of this great empire to the establishment of the revenue of the Crown, permit yourself to be influenced by the peevish complaints of those whose debilitated nerves tremble at the idea of popular commotions, and have so little sense, as to attribute them to the use of ardent spirits ;
will

will you suffer yourself to be blinded by the absurd complaints of them who tell you of the subversion of our morals, and destruction of our health. From the same ridiculous causes, will you shut out from your recollection the innumerable reasons you have to confide in the faith of Scotsmen, to trust in their attachment to their King and Constitution, to admire their courage, their industry, their perseverance; all virtues incompatible with the idea of general intemperance. Will you permit a few insulated events, the ebullitions of a few inconsiderable discontented people, exaggerated by the representations of the timid or designing; will you suffer yourself, contrary to reason, to experience, to truth, to sound policy, to treat a people with insolence, who deserve so well of you, to throw away a revenue, of which the public stand so much in need; to discourage or destroy a manufacture so highly conducive to our agricultural interests, and therefore, to the best interests of the community. I am fully persuaded, Sir, you will enquire more fully, think more accurately, and determine more wisely, than ever to suffer yourself to act *so inconsiderately, so wrong*; but a good law, maturely weighed, and formed for permanency, plain in its construction, and easy and determined in its execution, will convince the country, that you are enlightened upon the subject, and have only their interest at heart; and their general approbation will be cordially joined by

A MID-LOTHIAN FARMER.

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Letter to ... William Pitt, upon the
subject of his late speech in Parliament,
concerning the S... ..

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